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The Use of ICT in Supporting Distance Chinese Language Learning — Review of The Open University's Beginners' Chinese Course

(运用信息通讯技术支持远程汉语学习——英国开放大学初级汉语课程评述)

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Abstract: Information communication technology (ICT), when used appropriately, can support language learning as well as enhance the learning experience. Although there is a lot of research on the role of technology in distance language learning, there is relatively little research on how it is used to support Chinese language teaching and learning at a distance. This paper reviews the role of technology in The Open University's Beginners' course in Chinese. It describes and discusses how and why various technologies are used to support teaching and learning in a context that mixes text and online self-study with attending online and face-to-face tutorials, with regard to the challenges of teaching and learning Chinese at a distance. The paper draws on data from a mixture of questionnaires together with telephone interviews, forum messages and routine statistics to review and evaluate students' learning experience. In addition, the challenges and limitations of the chosen technologies are considered. The aims of this paper are as follows: i) to offer a fresh perspective on the understanding of distance Chinese language learning and teaching; ii) to share our experiences in the successful application of technology in learning and teaching; and iii) to examine the relationship between the use of technology and learning and teaching.

摘要: 教育信息科技应用得当时能够支持语言学习并使学习过程愉悦。虽然有大量的研究是有关教育科技在远程外语教学中的作用, 不过, 有关如何将教育信息科技用于协助远程中文教学的研究相对来说还不多。本文旨于回顾教育信息科技在英国开放大学远程初级中文课程中的作用, 并深入探讨如何在远程自学加面对面以及在线课堂环境中应用不同的教育科技与工具。本文以问卷、电话访谈、在线论坛帖子与统计数字来检视评量学生的学习经验。此外, 并进一步探讨所使用的信息科技的局限以及挑战。希望透过本文的研究能提供汉语教师以及语言行政人员三点心得: 其一, 提供更进一步了解远程汉语教与

学的新视角；其二，分享英国开放大学于语言教与学方面的成功应用经验；其三，探讨信息科技的应用与语言教学之间的关系。

Keywords: Beginners' Chinese, distance language learning, role of technology

关键词: 初级汉语，远程外语学习，科技之作用

1. Introduction

In the last fifteen years, the accelerating development in information and communication technology (ICT), the availability of mobile devices and applications and wide range of tools and software have changed the way the language is learnt (Kirkwood & Price, 2006; Nicolson et al, 2011; Kukulska-Hulme, 2012). Confronted with ever increasing range and variety of new technologies, course designers and teachers are faced with pedagogical and technological choices in order to ensure that the technologies enhance rather than diminish the learning experience and that they help to achieve learning outcomes.

Research has demonstrated that students' study behaviour is primarily driven not by media and technology, but educational purpose and pedagogy (Price & Kirkwood, 2008). Students will probably make more and better use of technology if they know precisely *why* rather than just *how* they should use a particular technology in their learning. Weasenforth et al (2005) holds similar view and point out that the success of any instructional technology depends on 'the pedagogical uses of technology rather than on the technology itself' (p.195). Blake (2008, 2009) addresses the important issue of how technology can be effectively implemented in the service of language teaching and learning in a reader-friendly and informative fashion.

By reviewing the use of technology in the Beginners' Chinese course, some of the Open University's (OU¹) distance language teaching and learning practices, as well as important technological considerations that have been adopted in the design and delivery of the course, are discussed with the emphasis on:

- 1) an analysis of the challenges of a particular course, students profile and their needs;
- 2) the importance of knowledge and awareness concerning the most up to date technologies; and
- 3) particular considerations of various technologies, such as whether they a) are appropriate for the demands of the task, context, and learning goals; b) provide something which is not available through other existing channels; c) engage students in learning; and d) improve the quality of teaching and provide students with an improved learning experience.

¹ The Open University is the largest open and distance learning university in the UK with more than 250,000 students (Over 71% of OU students work full or part-time during their studies).

2. Background

In response to the increasing demands in language learning through distance education, the Department of Languages at The Open University (UK) introduced beginners' Chinese to its curriculum in November 2009 when 467 students were enrolled at the start of the course. In November 2010, a further 344 students were enrolled. This paper describes and evaluates the first two cohorts of the course. The statistics reported here are mainly from the 2009 cohort, which consist of: i) routine statistics from the course website about usage and student enrollment data provided by the university; ii) two questionnaires at the end of the course, one survey focusing on study motivation² and one end-of-course survey³ on all aspects of the course; iii) forum messages; and iv) telephone interviews with 15 students on the use of online forums..

2.1 Course model and structure

Beginners' Chinese was designed according to the blended learning model. Although definitions of blended learning and teaching vary (Heinze & Procter 2004; Oliver & Trigwell, 2005), the concept refers to an approach to 'provide the kind of flexibility required if learning opportunities are to match the demands created by the economic and social changes' (Nicolson et al. 2011. p.4). Using this model, the course is delivered using a mixture of print, audio and online materials, face-to-face tutorials and synchronous online tutorials using Elluminate (see 3.3). The teaching materials, divided into 36 sessions, are carefully developed by The Open University for distance learning⁴. The total duration of the course is 44 weeks including 4 revision weeks and 4 weeks' break (i.e. 36 weeks of study time corresponding to 36 sessions). Students are expected to spend approximately 7 hours per week on learning each session, including:

- attending tutorials⁵ (0.5 hour as not every week has a tutorial);
- studying the print and audio course materials (4 hours);
- doing interactive online exercises (1-2 hours); and
- completing assignments (0.5 hour as not every week has an assignment).

Of 252 study hours (based on an average figure of 7 hours per week), only 21 hours are time-tabled tutorials (splitting between face-to-face and online) spread over 36 weeks⁶.

Unlike campus-based language classes, our tutorials take place after the self-study has taken place, that is to say, tutorials are not there to teach new vocabulary and grammar points, but to consolidate what has been learnt. Our face-to-face tutorials mostly focus on developing the speaking skill and give students the opportunity to interact with the tutor and fellow students. The online tutorials normally cover some difficult key

² 86 students of the 2009 cohort completed the online questionnaire.

³ 108 students of the 2009 cohort completed the online questionnaire.

⁴ There are two main course books with two practice books (in print and pdf to download) and 4 accompanying CDs (OU, 2009, 2010)

⁵ Both the face-to-face and online tutorials are optional.


⁶ A typical face-to-face tutorial runs for 2 hours on a Saturday as students have to travel to attend the session; and a typical online tutorial is between 1 hour and 1.30 hours.

learning points and provide students with the opportunity to practice the key structures of the sessions covered. The teaching plans and slides for tutorials are provided to all the tutors by the course team. Tutors are free to adapt them to the needs of their group. A 'Tutor group' consists of 15 to 20 students. Some tutors only have one group whilst others may have more than one. Each tutor is responsible for teaching both face-to-face and online tutorials of a particular group as well as marking assignments of that group.

Beginners' Chinese is a Level 1 course worth 30 points, which students can study as a stand-alone course outside of a qualification or as part of a degree (e.g. as one of the options for BA in Modern Languages). The course teaches Mandarin Chinese in its standardized spoken modern form (Putonghua) and in simplified characters. The intended learning outcomes are comparable to A2 as defined by the Council of Europe's Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (CEFR) (2001). The assessment strategy for the two cohorts discussed here comprises a combination of six 'continuous assessments' (i.e. periodically throughout the course) and an end-of-course assessment (including a Reading/Writing paper and a Speaking paper). Students are advised to follow the Study Calendar (see Figure 1) which gives a broad outline of when to study each session, the dates by which assignments need to be submitted and when to revise or take a break. Students are also encouraged to use the online study planner (see 3.1 below) which acts as a weekly guide to the various course materials. However, it is their choice when to study, where to study, what to study or when to take a break according to their own ways of learning or life style and need, with the guidance of their tutor. This level of flexibility, however, is allowed only on the condition that students' assignments are submitted, according to the deadlines of the Study Calendar. Tutors provide detailed feedback for each assignment, commenting on the strengths and weaknesses as well as what they should do to progress. Students can then make necessary adjustment so as to meet the learning outcomes. The issues connected with providing a structure through the Study Calendar and study planner versus flexibility will be discussed in 3.1 below.

Study Calendar 2010-11

L197: Beginners' Chinese



Study week	Start date	Course Books and Practice Books	Tutorials*	Assignment number	Cut-off date
0	25 Oct	Preparatory week			
1	1 Nov	Book 1, Unit 1, Session 1			
2	8 Nov	Session 2			
3	15 Nov	Session 3			
4	22 Nov	Session 4			
5	29 Nov	Revision		TMA 1	2 Dec 10
6	8 Dec	Book 1, Unit 2, Session 5			
7	13 Dec	Session 6			
	20 Dec	Break (1 week)			
8	27 Dec	Session 7			
9	3 Jan	Session 8			
10	10 Jan	Revision		TMA 2	13 Jan 11
11	17 Jan	Book 1, Unit 3, Session 9			

Figure 1: An extract from the 2010 Study Calendar for OU's Beginners' Chinese showing the first 11 weeks⁷.

⁷ Students can download the whole Study calendar. Tutorials column is there for them to fill in their own tutorial dates.

2.2 Challenges in teaching and learning Chinese at a distance

In addition to the widely recognized challenges of learning Chinese at beginners' level (which include tones and character recognition and writing; see, for example, Hu, 2010; Liang & van Heuven, 2007), there are various additional difficulties of learning Chinese at a distance. These include: time constraints, as most students have a full-time or part-time job in addition to a variety of domestic responsibilities so time-management is essential (张伟远, 2008; Yan & McCormick, 2010; 阚茜, 2012); lack of physical and visual presence of tutors and fellow students (Hurd, 2005); a lack of interaction and speaking opportunities (Hurd, 2005); and the demands and frustrations of ICT such as installing Chinese font, converting between characters and pinyin, incompatibility between files, and learning to use other online tools and software (Kan & McCormick, 2012).

An additional challenge concerns the diversity of student population and motivation. Unlike campus-based courses where students are more homogeneous in regard to age, qualifications and study goals the characteristics of OU students can vary considerably. For example, ages range from under 25 to over 70, educational backgrounds (see Table 1) also differ; and motivation is largely driven by factors such as learning for pleasure and academic challenge (see Table 2).

Table 1: Beginners' Chinese Students Profile. $n=467$

(Source: Students Statistics Service, IET, enrollment data 2009, The Open University, UK)

Qualifications	No formal qualifications	3%
	Less Than 2 A-Levels ⁸	12%
	2+ A-Levels or Equivalent	21%
	HE Qualifications	37%
	Postgraduate Qualifications	25%
	Not Known	2%

Table 2: Top 5 Reasons for Studying Chinese.

For pleasure and interest	37.2%
As an intellectual challenge	18.6%
To assist me in my present or future work	15.1%
To be able to communicate when visiting a Chinese-speaking Country	11.6%
To be able to communicate with Chinese-speaking friends or family	9.3%

This student profile is similar to students learning other European languages at OU. In the following section, I shall discuss how various technologies have been used to meet some of the above challenges such as time-management; lack of tutor presence and interaction; lack of speaking opportunities as well as learning tones.

⁸ A levels are studied typically between the ages of 16-18 in England, Wales and Northern Ireland.

3. Use of technology

All language courses at the OU are supported by the Virtual Learning Environment (VLE)⁹, which plays a central role in the beginners' Chinese course. A Virtual Learning Environment has been defined as a 'computer-based (as opposed to physical) environment in which learning is supported, made possible or encouraged' (Twinisles.dev, 2003). The VLE for beginners' Chinese course provides the link between print, electronic, audio and online learning materials, online instructions on using language software as well as guiding students through their weeks of study. In this regard, it offers students a weekly study planner, links to an online conferencing tool, digital resources, assessment materials, interactive language activities, study tips, news, online forums, etc. This new learning environment encourages as much interaction as possible in the second language learning, which is the welcoming learning environment Garret (1991) envisaged for computer-assisted language learning (CALL) nearly two decades ago. Below, I shall discuss how VLE encourages such interaction through the use of the following four tools: study planner, online conferencing tool, interactive language practices and online discussion forums.

3.1 Online study planner – providing structure for learning

Distance learners 'need a teaching and learning framework that engenders a high level of motivation to help them stay on track during the learning process' (Garrido, 2005, p.185). The online study planner (see Figure 2 and Figure 3) provides such a structure to help students better manage their time. In the post-course survey, when asked to identify three factors that were most important for distance language learners in the light of their experience of the beginners' Chinese course, the most frequently cited were as follows: first, being well-organized; second, enthusiasm and motivation, and third; a willingness to communicate. Data from the interview and forum messages indicated the combination of flexibility and a certain degree of structure increased retention rates. One student said in the interview: "I've had various stabs at trying to learn Mandarin before but I've never got as far as I have on this course. I've been to some good evening and adult ed[ucation] classes but I personally just don't have the discipline to do homework and revision on my own so the OU approach of set exercises and a timetable really works for me".

⁹ This uses Moodle as the software base.

The screenshot shows a web browser window with the URL https://mids.open.ac.uk/students/course.aspx?cmL197_2009K. The page title is "L197 Beginners' Chinese - StudentHome". The navigation bar includes links for StudentHome, Profile, Courses, Qualifications, OU Life, Study Support, A-Z, and FAQs. The main content area is titled "L197 Beginners' Chinese" and features a "Study planner" tab. The planner shows a list of tasks with checkboxes for completion. The tasks are organized into weeks, starting with "25 October • Preparatory week" and "1 November • Unit 1". The right sidebar contains sections for "Assessment" (listing TMA 01 to TMA 06 with cut-off dates and scores), "Course record", "Tutor", "Tutorials", "Learner support", and "Other Information".

Figure 2: An extract from the 2009 cohort course website of OU's Beginners' Chinese (at first weeks of the course) showing Study planner in the middle.

The close-up shows the "15 November • Unit 1" section of the study planner. It lists tasks for "Session 3 我是英国人". The tasks are: "Plan for Session 3", "Listening practice: Session 3", "Grammar practice: Session 3", "Reading practice: Session 3", "Speaking practice: Introductions", "Typing practice: Session 3 (49.5KB)", "Study Tip: Learning vocabulary", "Study Tip: Vocabulary strategies", and "Culture: Ways to address people". Each task has a checkbox to its left, indicating it can be marked as completed.

Figure 3: A Close-up of Week 3 Study planner from the 2010 cohort course website of OU's Beginners' Chinese.

The study planner not only offers a structure for learning so that it helps students better manage their time (the check boxes are provided for students to tick after they finish each task), but also they can interact and engage with the learning materials of that week because each link takes students to a different learning activity (see 3.3). As Figure 3 shows, each week starts with a plan for that week. For example, 'Plan for Session 3' takes students to a detailed listing of key learning points and things to do for that week. Because students' backgrounds, study goals and time commitment differ, some students only do the minimal work required whilst others might do everything listed in the

planner. For example, a ‘minimalist’ student may simply learn the key vocabulary, study the grammar points and do some activities in the print materials for each session. This may be due to work pressure or other commitment in life. If a student knows he is going to be busy in one month’s time, he or she can plan ahead and study the sessions ahead of the time, and submit the next assignment before the cut-off date. At the other end of the spectrum, some students might do everything in the study planner. However, those that *seem* to do everything may not actually do everything. For example, students who were very good at character recognition tended to skip some reading exercises. Evidence for this was obtained from the course forum where these students shared their learning strategies and discussed how many activities they had completed. It is this combination of structure plus flexibility which helps students to stay on to the end of the course and achieve the learning outcomes.

3.2 Synchronous online conferencing tool - Elluminate

All the language courses at the OU have online tutorials using Elluminate¹⁰, an online synchronous web conferencing tool. Elluminate is like a virtual classroom where a tutor and students in a ‘Tutor group’ meet at a timetabled slot in real time¹¹. As previously mentioned, a student is allocated to a group with a tutor who runs face-to-face and Elluminate tutorials, and marks assignments. Physical location and time is variable and students can therefore join another tutor’s face-to-face or online tutorial, but they must hand in their assignments to their own tutor. In addition to voice communication, there are visual tools like Text Chat and the Whiteboard where tutors can present the prepared teaching materials, be it text, images or video clips. Camera can be switched on if the tutor wishes to. Another particularly useful function of Elluminate for language learning is this: tutors can split a large group into pairs and send them to different virtual rooms with different activities preloaded on the Whiteboard so that they can conduct speaking practice in small groups. The Whiteboard allows students to manipulate tutor prepared slides so it is particularly suitable for language exercises such as dragging and dropping, filling in the blanks and re-ordering a sentence or paragraph. Tutors can also record a tutorial session with the consent of the group so that those students who missed the class can play the recording. This is rather like watching a video clip as it captures both the audio and the visual. A study by Stickler and Shi (2011) on the use of Elluminate in teaching Chinese reports the following main benefits of this tool: catering for feedback in different modes (audio and text); effective classroom management (tutors can preload tutorial materials); catering for different learner types (extrovert or shy, as a tutor can put them into different groups); less exposure for shy students; displaying characters and pinyin. However, there could be technical problems associated with the connection, audio quality, character editing on the Whiteboard etc. For such a tool to be successful and effective, it must be institutionally supported and both tutors and students need to be

¹⁰ Lyceum, a conferencing tool developed in house, was introduced in 2002 (Hampel & Hauck 2004) but replaced by Elluminate for better audio quality and more sophisticated functionalities.

¹¹ Telephone tutorials are offered to students who do not have broadband access.

provided with appropriate training¹². Teacher training is crucial in the use of new technology (Blake, 2008, ch.6)

In addition to using Elluminate for online tutorials to remedy the lack of tutor presence, another substantial benefit to students is that they can use it to practice speaking Chinese. Students are encouraged to organize meetings amongst themselves on Elluminate. As it is a web-based tool, students can access it at any time. On the course forum, there is much evidence that students organize such meetings. The tool has increased learners' opportunities to practice their spoken Chinese and it has also promoted the interaction between students.

3.3 Interactive online language exercises

To compensate for the lack of interaction between students and tutors, especially the relative absence of a Chinese-speaking environment in the UK, online language exercises are added to the Study planner in the VLE to help students revise and reinforce what they have learnt in a particular week so as to prepare them for the continuous and end-of-course assignments. They include speaking, listening, grammar and reading exercises. As spoken communication is a vital element in language learning, we have designed the online speaking practice, in part, to 'address the well-known drawback of learning a language at distance – the development and practice of oral skills' (Hurd, 2005, p.14). In each speaking exercise, students are given clear instructions as to what to do. For example, they may first hear a question, and then record themselves giving the answer using either verbal or visual prompts. They can then hear a sample recording with which to compare their own. The transcript of what they hear and the sample answer is accessible online. This is provided by the general facilities of the Moodle software, but specifically developed by OU to suit all of its language courses.

For the latter three skills, each practice session tends to include between 8 and 10 questions which are mostly multiple choice questions marked by computer (see Figure 4). They are interactive in the sense that students will get instant feedback about their performance¹³. For listening practice, students will see the transcript of the recording only after they have attempted all the questions and they are then encouraged to read the transcripts and listen to all the questions again. As character learning is one of the challenges in learning Chinese, the reading practice focuses on character recognition and reading comprehension.

¹² Elluminate is supported by OU's Helpdesk. The department provides drop-in training sessions for both tutors and students.

¹³ Also known as iCMA (interactive computer-marked assignment) but they do not form part of the assessment.

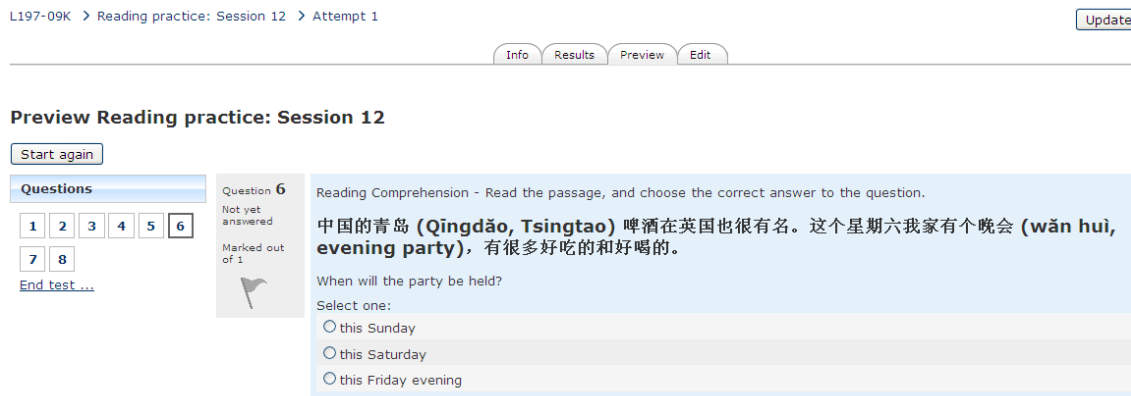


Figure 4: An example of online reading exercise for Session 12

These online language exercises ‘promote a degree of interaction with the audio-visual stimuli available within the course’ (Garrido, 2005, p.184). They also put control into students’ hands as they can decide which exercises to do, when to do them as well as taking as much time as they wish on a particular task. Routine statistics captured by VLE indicates that these online interactive materials were frequently accessed by students. Of the fifteen students interviewed, seven of them used most of the online materials. As the tasks range from easy to difficult, they suit both real beginners and false beginners who need more challenging tasks to keep them engaged with the learning. However, there are various limitations, which include the system being able to accept only one correct answer and the limited feedback on speaking.

3.4 Online discussion forums

Research has shown that one of the main factors in being a successful distance language learner relates to affective variables. Hurd (2005) points out that ‘for the distance language learner, it is perhaps affective variables – beliefs, motivations and anxiety – that are of greater relevance [than other variables]’. Previous research shows that online forums are an ideal platform for peer support (Hammond, 2000) and for promoting learning and cohesion (Lamy & Goodfellow, 1999). For this reason, all the OU language courses have course-specific online forums. The challenges in learning Chinese at a distance mean that students need more support emotionally and academically.

For the 2009/2010 academic year group, there were three forums open to all students and tutors on the course: the course forum for discussing all course-related issues, the culture forum for students to share their reflections and opinions in Chinese-speaking cultures encountered in the course materials, and the café forum for arranging social activities and meetings. The most populated forum on Beginners’ Chinese course was the course forum with 370 discussion threads and over 4,300 postings. Forum participation was voluntary and discussions were mostly in English. Kan and McCormick (2012) conducted a study on the 2009 cohort’s course forum and the study shows that that online forums play a crucial role in building course cohesion and providing peer support as well as sharing learning strategies (especially strategies in learning characters).

The data from the motivation survey strongly supports this as the top three reasons for visiting the course forum were: i) bench-marking and being part of a learning community; ii) seeking support; and iii) giving support. Studies on the 2009 cohort's culture forum (Álvarez, 2011; Álvarez & Kan, 2012) also indicate that this asynchronous text-based tool plays a very important role in supporting and contributing towards the learning of Chinese language as well as intercultural learning.

Although students' participation on the three forums is completely voluntary, the data collected in the study conducted by Kan and McCormick (2012) shows that 90.8% of students of 2009 cohort visited the forum (including both contributing and just reading) regularly or occasionally.

One of the bonus of online discussion forums is the immediate feedback the teaching staff can get as students discuss all course related issues including reporting the malfunction of some links and their difficulties and frustration with the technology so that the course team can respond in a timely fashion. Thanks to many useful suggestions by the 2009 and 2010 cohorts, many online language exercises have been updated, and the instructions on using many tools have been revised for the later cohorts.

4. Conclusion

Knowing student profile, study motivation and the challenges of learning Chinese at a distance were important in deciding appropriate technologies to be adopted for the course to help students achieve the learning outcomes and enhance their learning experience. The end-of-course survey was positive overall with 93.3% (the 2009 cohort) and 93.7% (the 2010 cohort) satisfied with the quality of the course; and 88.6% (the 2009 cohort) and 93.7% (the 2010 cohort) satisfied with the study experience. However, one of the challenges ahead of the Chinese team at OU is how best to integrate various learning resources to maximize learning outcomes without overloading students.

The main argument of this paper is that the design and delivery of a course must be decided by pedagogy and educational outcomes rather than by technology. In the meantime, we must bear in mind the impact of ever increasing new technologies on teaching and learning. When adopting a particular technology, considerations must be given to how the technology can meet the challenges and the demands of the task, context, and learning goals; if it has the added value; if it engages students in learning; and finally if it improves the quality of teaching and enhances the learning experience.

Further research needs to be done to understand more about students' attitude towards the new technologies, how they use them and their experience with them so that teachers and course designers can come up with better and more enjoyable courses.

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